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ABSTRACT

The Adjective Generation Technique (AGT) has been used in studies to demonstrate that subjects' responses show variations from one point in time to the next. To examine this hypothesis, longitudinal studies were undertaken where subjects were asked to generate five words to describe themselves on each of 29 days. Some conclusions drawn were that: (1) people perform different behaviors on different contiguous days, thus manifesting different "traits" on different days; (2) this variability is partially controlled by variability in "significant life events"; (3) individual differences in such variability are apparent, but even relatively consistent people vary considerably; (4) self-monitoring may in part explain the variability; (5) a few situations determine much the same behavior in different people; (6) males and females do not differ in variability, but females have lower over-all AGT favorability scores; and (7) a subject's description of her "true self" changes from one point in time to the next. (Author/BMW)

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Inconsistency Across Time and Situations:
A Decade of Research Using the Adjective
Generation Technique (AGT)

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By using the Adjective Generation Technique in several studies conducted over the past ten years, we have been able to demonstrate that subjects responses show remarkable variation from one point in time to the next. In addition, we have been able to discover some of the sources of that variation. The Adjective Generation Technique or AGT is really quite simple. Subjects are asked to write down five words to describe themselves. They may also be asked to describe someone else (Allen, 1971; Potkay, Merrens, and Allen, 1979) or a nonhuman object (Potkay, Allen, and Merrens, 1975). In our first longitudinal study (Allen and Potkay, 1973) we asked subjects to generate five words to describe themselves on each of 29 days. They recorded the words on pieces of paper along with the date and their personal ID number. The words they used amounted to labels for the most prominent behaviors that they enacted on the days of the study. Some of the words that they recorded were the same as those used as labels for common traits (e.g., thoughtful, trustworthy, irresponsible, friendly, conceited). We reasoned that if people do have "traits" which govern their behavior, they should regularly observe themselves performing behaviors related to traits which are at the top

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of their personal hierarchies of traits. In so doing they should produce daily lists of words which overlap to a great extent. Particularly, they should regularly record the labels for their most prominent or powerful traits.

On the other hand, the position introduced by Donald Fiske (1957, 1960, 1961; Fiske & Rice, 1955), most clearly articulated by Walter Mischel (1968, 1969, 1973, 1977, 1978), and also endorsed by Kenneth Gergen (1971; Morse & Gergen, 1970) lead to opposite expectations. If these theorist-researchers are correct in assuming that people show marked variation from one point in time to the next, from one social situation to the next due to their unique histories in the situations that they encounter, then people should generate different words on different days. In fact, our subjects did produce different words on different days, showing little overlap from one day to the next. By looking at page one of the handout you can see how subjects mixed words within days, often including words indicating contradictory behaviors.

To quantify this day to day variability, we referred each word that each subject provided to a list of favorability values derived by the use of the Norman Anderson method (1968). Incidentally, our list now includes more than 2200 words and associated favorability values and as many values on each of two other dimensions as well.

Each subject's daily score was a mean over the five values corresponding to the five words she generated. We found that within subjects variance in daily scores across the 29 days of the study was greater than variance in over-all level scores averaged over the 29 days. That is, subjects varied more within themselves over time than they differed among themselves in over-all level scores.

The second page of the handout shows variation in daily scores for the typical subject: the one who most resembled the other subjects. As you can see, the typical subject displays an up one day, down the next pattern of daily scores which reflects the use of different words on different days, i.e., the display of different behaviors on different days. There were also some suggestions in the data with regard to the source of this change from day to day. An analysis of days of the week confirmed the blue Monday, TGIF tradition, though weakly. Favorability was generally low at the beginning of the week and high at the end of the week. Also, analysis of weeks of the academic quarter indicated a pattern of high favorability at the beginning, middle and end of the quarter. These findings led us to the next phase of our research: location of a major source of longitudinal AGT variability.

In our second longitudinal study, published in 1977 (Allen and Potkay, 1977a), the procedure was essentially the same as just described, except that this time subjects also reported any "significant events" which occurred to them on each of 47 days. A subject recorded a "significant event" if she/he felt that anything which happened on a given day was important or significant from her/his point of view. AGT self-descriptive scores were computed as before and significant events were also scored for degree of favorability. Each subject's significant event recordings were rated by a male and a female for desirability or favorability. Rater agreement was generally high.

Again we found that subjects tended to generate different words on different days. Again, the within subjects variability in favorability of daily AGT scores exceeded the between subjects variability in favorability of over-all "level" scores. More important, subjects apparently

observed themselves performing favorable behaviors when favorable events occurred and unfavorable behaviors when unfavorable events occurred, because the behavioral labels they recorded on "favorable event" days were much more favorable than the labels recorded on "unfavorable event" days. This effect was revealed in an analysis of variance on daily AGT scores where the factors were "events" and subjects or persons. The "events" factor had three levels: days on which favorable events occurred, days on which neutral events occurred and days on which unfavorable events occurred. The events effect was highly significant and accounted for much more variance than the subjects or persons factor according to both Dwyers' (1974) variance explained method and Golding's (1975) generalizability method.

We believed that our results fit Mischel's (1973) point of view because subjects were free to select situations or settings for events in which they had considerable past histories. These past histories in the settings for the events determined behavior rather than the events per se. We also believed that our results were not congruent with the point of view of Daryl Bem and Andrea Allen (1974). As prescribed by Bem and Allen (1974) our subjects were free to employ their own conceptions of whatever behavioral dimensions they found to be relevant (they selected out whatever behaviors they considered relevant and chose their own words to describe these behaviors). Also, as prescribed by Bem and Allen, subjects were free to select situations (settings for events) and to describe the associated events in their own words. However, despite meeting Bem and Allen's basic conditions for the display of consistency, our research failed to reveal consistency across time and situations. This consideration of Bem and Allen (1974) was strictly

post hoc, as their paper was not available when we collected our data. Thus we were surprised when Daryl Bem (1977) wrote a critique of our work. His critique and our reply (Allen and Potkay, 1977b) are too tangential to be considered here--you can have copies of both papers by writing us. However, the experience did stimulate our interest in Bem and Allen's position and led to some analyses in our most recent and as yet unpublished longitudinal study.

In the third study we granted the Bem and Allen (1974) position that some people are more consistent than others. However, our previous work led us to believe that even people who vary less than others still vary considerably in an absolute sense. Thus we wanted to show that even so called "consistent" people vary appreciably. We also wanted to investigate Mark Snyder's (Snyder & Monson, 1975) rather elegant explanation of why some people vary more than others, self-monitoring. We believed that self-monitoring would predict AGT variability over time.

Finally we wanted to address ourselves to Mischel's (1973) theory. Contrary to a prevalent opinion, Mischel is not a "situationist," has never been and never could be. For a strong statement to this effect see his 1978 APA paper. He believes that if the behavioral competencies of a given individual in a situation, her categorizations of events associated with the situation, her expectancies concerning behavioral outcomes and values to these outcomes, and the self-regulatory rules peculiar to her all are known then the individual's behavior can be predicted. Mischel's is a person-situation approach. However, he does acknowledge that there are a relatively few situations--perhaps a few hundred out of the many thousands that people encounter--which are construed in the same way by different individuals and for which different

individuals have identical competencies so that different individuals react the same to the situations. Although such situations are relatively few in number, they are numerous enough to be encountered daily. Thus we sought to locate some situations which affect everyone in much the same way.

The procedure of the third study was essentially the same as that of the other two longitudinal studies. Again within subject variability over time exceeded between subjects variability in overall level scores. As Bem and Allen (1974) would predict, we found that people who said they varied considerably over time in fact showed significantly more variability in AGT daily scores than people who indicated that they varied little. However, the correlation between self-proclamation of variability scale scores and actual variability in AGT scores was small and not significant. Also, high self-monitoring persons varied significantly more than low self-monitoring persons. High self-monitoring subjects changed more, according to Snyder's conception, because they are more concerned about the appropriateness of their behavior and thus more closely attend to the behavior of other people in a situation in search of guidelines for their own behavior. The correlation between self-monitoring scale scores and AGT variability over time was appreciable (.32), though not significant due to lack of statistical power.

Thus some people do vary more than others and self-monitoring may explain why. Nevertheless we constructed profiles of the least and most variable subjects in our sample in order to demonstrate that even relatively consistent people vary considerably. These profiles are the third and fourth pages of your handout. As you can see, the most variable subject changed remarkably, almost like a human chameleon, while the

least variable subject looks almost stable by comparison. But only by comparison. You can easily see that the least variable subject sometimes approached a two hundred point change from one day to the next (the scale has 600 points). Here the eye-ball test seems like the best test, but it was not the only one we performed. Both self-proclaimed consistent people and low self-monitoring persons varied more within themselves in AGT daily scores than they differed from one another in over-all level scores.

Finally, we attempted to locate some situations which would affect individuals in much the same way so that they would behave in similar manner and thus produce similar words to describe themselves. We approached the problem in two different ways.

First I tried to plan some thrilling classroom experiences which would overwhelm student-subjects and cause them to produce words like fulfilled, benevolent, cultured, and sensitive. Much to my chagrin, different subjects produced different words on the days of my "happenings," although there was more than occasional use of such words as "bored," "distracted," and the like. Much to my comfort, it now seems difficult to create "situations" which will be construed in the same way, involve the same behavioral competencies, and create the same reactions in different people. Such situations are probably simple, naturally occurring, and frequently encountered by a wide variety of people.

Our second approach proved to be more fruitful. Here we attempted to locate natural events or situations which would be encountered by all or almost all subjects, would be construed in the same way by different subjects and would affect different subjects in much the same way. One such situation or event was the approach of a long weekend due to the

July 4 holiday. On the day before the long holiday weekend AGT daily scores were significantly more favorable than over-all level scores. We also found situations which had the opposite effect. On days before tests AGT scores were significantly lower in favorability than over-all level scores. The "day before the test" finding has been independently replicated. There are situations which affect people in much the same way.

Of course, no research program is complete without at least some serendipitous findings. We had one in the third study which at first looked like a real scoop. Female subjects were significantly less variable than male subjects. This result contradicts the stereotype of "feminine capriciousness" as well as some very solid data collected by Carolyn Sherif and her colleagues (1976). Before contacting Time and Newsweek we decided to go back to the data for the previous two studies to look at sex differences in variability. Alas, in neither previous study was there any sex difference in variability. The finding for the third study was probably artifact, namely the most variable subject happened to be male and the least variable happened to be female. It seems that the best conclusion overall is still important although less dramatic than the original one: we don't find sex differences in variability over time.

However, our colleagues Paula Wise and Stephany Joy did alert us to a sex difference involving the AGT. In a single administration of the AGT they found female scores significantly less favorable than male scores. Again we went back to our longitudinal data--you are beginning to wonder why we didn't look at sex differences before; so do we. In all three studies overall level scores (i.e. daily scores averaged over time)

reflected greater favorability for males than females. Also, when we had parents describe their college age children, they described sons more favorably.

You may be wondering whether the tremendous variability that we observe is in part due to having subjects record words every day for a long period of time. Maybe that procedure suggests to subjects that they should be different each day (although Allen and Potkay, in press, argue to the contrary). Perhaps if we ask them to describe their true selves, regardless of time, situations or people--"give us the real you"--and we did so at widely disparate times we would find consistency rather than inconsistency. So we did. Unannounced at weekly intervals we asked subjects to record words to represent their "real true selves." We bent over backwards to get them to ignore time and place and situation and to focus instead on a view across time. Our instructions were as follows:

THINK OF YOURSELF AS YOU ARE IN GENERAL AND WRITE DOWN FIVE ADJECTIVES THAT BEST DESCRIBE YOUR BASIC PERSONALITY.

That is, think about yourself. Think about the real you, the person you really are, "deep down inside." Think about your essential characteristics, your true self, your basic personality.

That is, think of how you are regardless of the situations you find yourself in. Think of yourself regardless of time, place, other persons or events that may have influenced you.

SIMPLY THINK OF YOURSELF AS YOU ARE IN GENERAL AND WRITE DOWN FIVE ADJECTIVES THAT BEST DESCRIBE YOUR BASIC PERSONALITY.

In effect we invited them to look across time and ferret out those words which denote behaviors that they perform more frequently than others. This would seem to fit Epstein's (1977, 1979) orientation: sum across time thus enhancing any consistencies that might be present at the expense of variability. However, when we compared subjects words recorded on one occasion with those used on another occasion, we found that subjects'

"true selves" changed from one week to the next, and significantly so. Further, subjects third occasion recall of their first occasion words showed significantly greater correspondence to those first occasion words than did the words representing "true self" recorded on the third occasion. To put it more simply, "true self" recordings changed from first to third occasion, even though subjects could remember much of what they recorded on the first occasion. Thus subjects showed change in "true self" despite need for consistency which could have been satisfied by recording words remembered from previous occasions. After the third occasion data collection we asked subjects what they thought we were investigating. They indicated it was more likely that we were testing memory and/or looking for consistency rather than that we were looking for inconsistency. In fact, they were rather certain that we were not looking for inconsistency. Yet inconsistency is what they displayed. One subject from another data collection described her experience with indicating "true self" by recording words at widely separated points in time. She wrote,

"I noticed the difference between the first list of adjectives I used to describe my essential characteristics and the (second) list, noting the distribution of adjectives I used. If personality is consistent, then I hypothesized that certain words would reappear many times throughout the study, as well as match the first list. Contrary to this hypothesis, I found that many words appeared two or three times throughout the six weeks (of the study), but not consistently. Furthermore, examining the first and second adjective lists, I felt I could compile even a third list listing words describing the 'real me' and it would be different still!"

She went on to say that in real life her parents, friends and boyfriend also changed in the words that they used to describe her "true self."

One final point concerning the utility of the AGT. It has been extensively used in all ten mental health centers of British Columbia as well as in a number of mental health centers in Illinois and an Alabama

center. It appears to be a useful measure of therapy outcome. You can see Gilligan and Wilderman (1977) and Potkay et al. (1973) for details. In general, results will be good news for therapists at least for those working with nonpsychotic out-patient groups. Therapy works!: AGT scores become significantly more favorable after therapy and there is some evidence that gains are maintained. You can see this for yourself by examining the last page of the handout. Thanks for your attention.

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Table 2

Two Weeks of Data from a Subject of Allen & Potkay (1977a)

Monday July 9, 1973	10	11	12	13	14
calm 406 productive 468 congenial 452 sociable 429 concerned 538 $\bar{X} = 458.6$	inquisitive 413 reserved 348 tired 155 confident 401 reflective 529 $\bar{X} = 369.2$	competent 447 verbal 421 determined 505 persuasive 374 assertive 403 $\bar{X} = 430.0$	reflective 529 frightened 214 paranoid 137 used 221 depressed 166 $\bar{X} = 253.4$	surprised 386 relieved 373 tired 155 confident 401 good natured 527 $\bar{X} = 368.4$	industrious 445 productive 268 agreeable 434 frustrated 188 $\bar{X} = 383.8$
		15 relaxed 439 entertaining 442 facilitative 434 tired 155 satisfied 449 $\bar{X} = 383.8$	week mean: <u>378.2</u>		
Monday July 16, 1973	17	18	19	20	21
relaxed 439 likable 497 creative 462 proud 358 bright 483 $\bar{X} = 447.8$	sincere 573 argumentative 227 active 455 organized 487 positive 403 $\bar{X} = 429.0$	tense 215 apprehensive 246 thorough 416 pessimistic 164 productive 468 $\bar{X} = 301.8$	tired 155 good natured 527 productive 468 philosophical 368 spontaneous 441 $\bar{X} = 395.4$	relaxed 439 productive 468 preoccupied 216 direct 396 fulfilled 407 $\bar{X} = 385.2$	happy 514 organized 487 humorous 505 productive 468 loving 550 $\bar{X} = 504.8$
		22 sharing 476 apprehensive 246 defensive 244 tense 215 preoccupied 216 $\bar{X} = 279.4$	week mean: <u>391.9</u>		

APPENDIX C

Variability of self-description

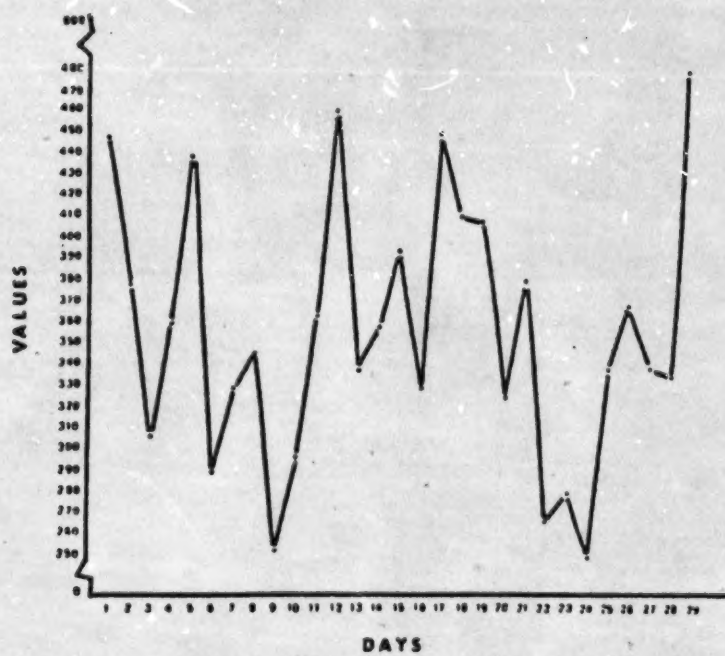
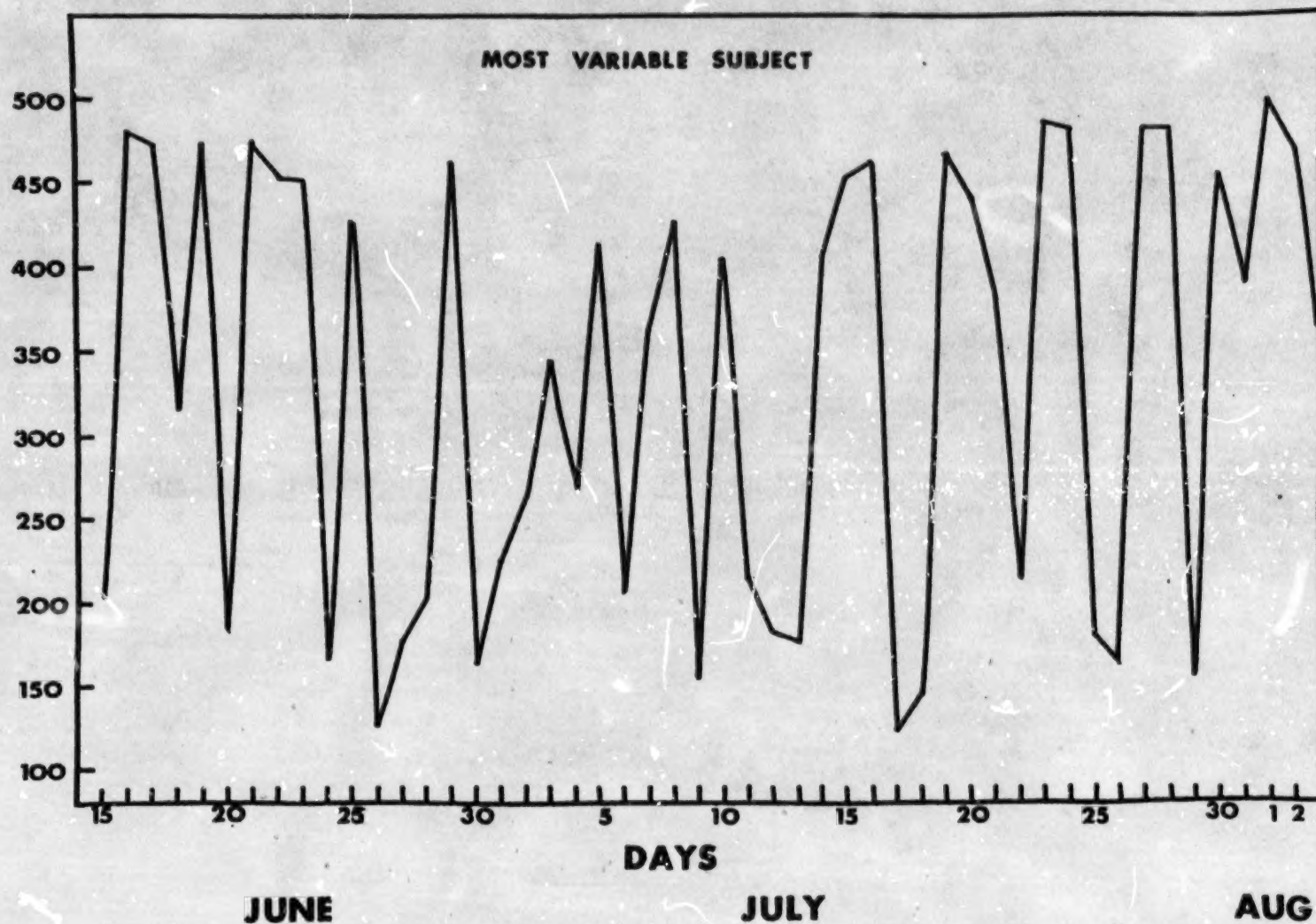
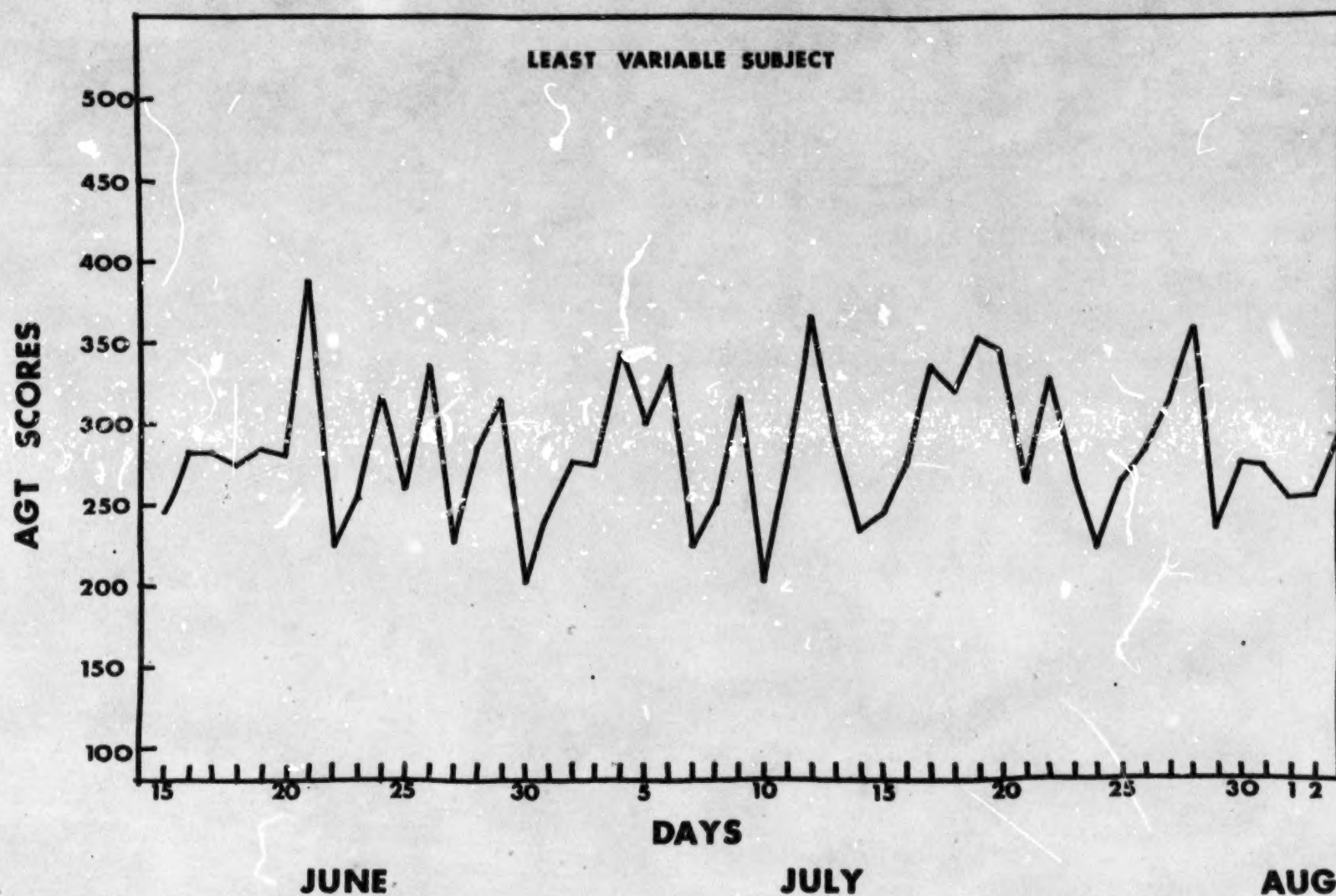


Figure 1. Day-to-day variability of the "typical subject."

AGT SCORES

MOST VARIABLE SUBJECT

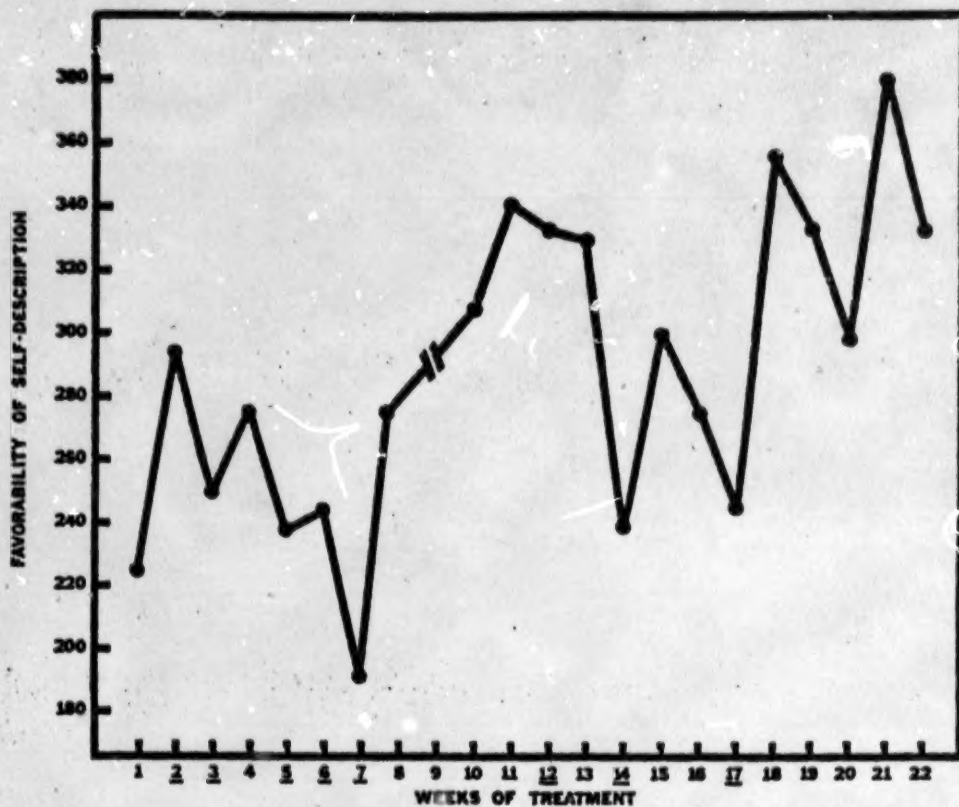




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USE OF THE ADJECTIVE GENERATION TECHNIQUE IN A THERAPY CONTEXT: CASE APPLICATION

See Charles R. Potkay, Bern P. Allen and Nancy Haapoja article, page 343

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